

GUIDANCE FOR PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED
PUPILS

by Elise H. Martens, Ph.D.

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GUIDANCE FOR PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED PUPILS¹

BY ELISE H. MARTENS, PH.D.

IN COMPETITIVE SPORTS a "handicap" is defined as a race or other contest "in which an artificial disadvantage is imposed upon a supposedly superior contestant in order to equalize the chances of winning"; or the "handicap" may refer to the disadvantage itself which has been thus imposed. A week ago I talked with a blind man who is successfully engaged in assisting other blind men to make a satisfactory occupational and social adjustment. He told me that he was bold enough to apply the terminology of sports to the lives of men and women, defining a physical handicap as "an extra burden placed upon a superior contender in order to equalize the contest." Of course there was a certain degree of facetiousness in his remark, for he knows as well as you and I do that not all physically handicapped persons can be considered "superior." But the important fact implied by his statement is that he regards his blindness—and the physical handicaps of other people—not as a calamity but as a challenge; not as a disability *because of which* he asks you and me to make allowances, but as a disadvantage *in spite of which* he must be able to show himself equal or superior to other men in his chosen field.

This man told me further that he needed constantly to guard against the demoralizing effects upon himself of the unwise kindnesses and consideration extended to him by other people. "Begin to make allowances for the handicapped person," he said, "and you're finished so far as helping him to make a successful adjustment is concerned. What he

needs is not your pity, or your willingness to overlook his mistakes, or your lowering of standards for him, but your insistence that he do as well as, or better than, the physically normal person those things which within reason he has chosen to undertake."

Several publications have appeared within the past few years written by mothers of handicapped children, in some cases by the handicapped person himself, emphasizing this same philosophy. A refusal to recognize the handicap as a fatal barrier to achievement and a persistent determination to lead the child to participate so far as possible in normal activities of normal children have marked the plan of home education carried on by wise, understanding parents. A similar attitude characterizes the school programs in those systems in which the guidance of physically handicapped pupils is accepted as an important responsibility of education.

This, of course, does not imply a disregard of the existence of the handicap nor yet an unreasonable insistence that the child attempt feats of normal children obviously impossible for him. On the contrary, he learns under wise guidance to recognize his limitations, graciously to accept assistance as needed, and to adjust his sphere of activity in accordance with his handicap. But at the same time he learns that the restrictions imposed by it are not nearly so great as some people might lead him to believe.

If this objective is a reasonable one, then certain problems growing directly out of the physical handicap are the special concern, both of those whose service is specifically limited to the field of vocational guidance, and of those who are committed to the larger

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35630 MIGEL

concept of guidance in all its phases of personal and social development. To build the attitude and the practice of success in the life of a normal child is not always an easy matter. In the child who is crippled, visually handicapped, deaf, hard of hearing, or otherwise physically defective it is fraught with difficulties. Yet his entire social, emotional, educational, and vocational adjustment depends upon the degree to which these difficulties have been met and overcome in the guidance program.

It is of three of the many problems that arise in such a program that I wish to speak this afternoon, with particular reference to the school child who has been handicapped since birth or has become handicapped at an early age. Yet there is no reason why the general principles discussed should not apply to all physically handicapped persons. The specific life-needs of the child to which I invite your attention are: 1. learning to live with other people; 2. learning to live with one's self; 3. learning to earn.

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH OTHER PEOPLE

Obviously, if the attitude of success is to be built up in a handicapped person, such a process cannot be delayed until the child approaches maturity or is ready to look about for a job. He, even more than the physically normal child, must have help in learning to *live with* other people before he can learn to *work for* other people. The findings of research have given evidence of a tendency toward personality disturbances, lack of emotional balance, even neurotic symptoms among children seriously handicapped from birth. Their very physical limitations make them shrink from certain wholesome social experiences that may in the beginning prove embarrassing, and the same limitations make them want to engage unduly in solitary or other activities not conducive to social adjustment or mental health. Granting that maximum physical aid has been given them,

the first task of a guidance program for physically handicapped pupils is to instill within them a desire and an ability to *enjoy* normal social contacts and experiences. What one enjoys, one is likely to want to do well. And so the foundation for building a wholesome attitude of success is laid, despite the difficulties of physical limitations.

It is this need of awakening early the social nature of handicapped children which has been partially responsible for the establishment of nursery schools for blind babies and for young deaf children. The daily opportunity to play with other young children—sometimes with those similarly handicapped, sometimes with normally seeing and hearing boys and girls—brings sooner or later a response of joyful abandon to the social situation; and the child has taken his first step toward adequate social adjustment.

To be sure, many more social lessons will need to be learned before he can live happily as a contributing member of a family, of a community, and of a state. Constructive citizenship involves all the problems of human relationships and behavior. These must be faced progressively with the physically handicapped as with the normal child; and they, too, are an important element in the total guidance program. But the beginning takes place when the handicapped child sees himself as a member of a group and not as an individual set apart from the group because of a physical difference. Special instructional provisions in special classes may be necessary in order to provide the tools of learning, but these should not interfere with the possibility of social contacts with other children—including *normal* children—even in the years while enrolled in special classes.

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH ONE'S SELF

But to live successfully one must be able to enjoy not only the company of other people. Upon occasion one should be able to enjoy one's own company—to have within one's

Another makes the reservation that:

When the handicap permits earning a livelihood in competition with people who are not handicapped, the training should be given in the same classes with physically normal children. If the person must work at home or in a secluded place, his training should be specialized and equipment modified. . . . All training should be planned only after an individual case study has been made.

In the city from which this comment came—and in certain other cities also—a plan is under way in co-operation with the State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, whereby selected handicapped students still in high school are placed in carefully chosen part-time jobs on an exploratory basis. They receive school credit for the work done and are paid a nominal sum to defray extra expenses. Such co-operation with the State rehabilitation service has guidance possibilities of wide import to physically handicapped high-school students who later will probably become clients of the rehabilitation agency. The plan likewise reflects the emphasis placed upon the need of arousing and maintaining the social consciousness of the handicapped pupil. His vocational success, as well as his mental health, depends upon it. Its realization should be an ever-present objective of the guidance program. As one person said: "Psychologically they should learn not to consider themselves different," and, we might add, they should learn to forget, or at least to compensate for, the physical differences.

Range of vocational choices.

In learning to earn, the physically handicapped boy and girl again face a very special problem, for they are obviously restricted in their occupational choice. Yet the restrictions are by no means as great as some have supposed. When a blind man can operate a three-hundred-acre poultry farm that has an output of a million and a half baby chicks a year; when a deaf brother and sister can earn

signal success with platform dancing on a professional basis; when a girl born without arms can serve with distinction a municipal social service agency as case interviewer and recorder, one wonders where the restrictions lie. Yet with the majority of cases one must admit that practical limitations exist which demand consideration in guiding the handicapped pupil toward occupational adjustment.

For all practical purposes the point of departure in determining the range of vocational choices is the type and the degree of the individual handicap. A severe spastic condition will eliminate the possibility of a large number of occupations for which many less seriously crippled children can be prepared. Yet some spastics have reached what was apparently an impossible goal in vocational adjustment through the will to conquer plus the ability to achieve.

For the partially seeing, who must conserve what little sight remains to them, office work making great demands upon or offering great temptation for the use of vision is necessarily out of consideration. An intelligent blind student, on the other hand, without any vision at all, can learn to give efficient service in some types of office work; and for the crippled, many of whom must have sedentary occupations, office work holds a high place. Certain types of selling offer greater opportunity to the visually handicapped than to the crippled or to the deaf, many of the former not having the ease of transportation or the latter the ease of communication usually required by it. The profoundly deaf are found most frequently in the trades and industries and in factory work, in which numerous occupations occur not demanding extensive communication; while the hard of hearing are much less limited in their occupational choices, especially if they supplement their residual hearing with the ability to read lips.

Such comparisons as these, however, can be made only in general terms. The greatest importance must be attached to the character-

on his shoulder," or is otherwise emotionally or socially maladjusted. If this is true, then we must certainly minimize the possibility of the occurrence of such maladjustments among physically handicapped pupils, who cannot afford to add to the extra burden they are already carrying any habits or attitudes which will jeopardize their occupational success.

The function of the high school.

There has been some variation of opinion with regard to the time of beginning specific vocational training for handicapped pupils. Some argue that it should begin early, occupying a significant proportion of the secondary school course; others believe that the function of a secondary school is not predominantly vocational. Two years ago the Office of Education studied the occupational guidance and experiences offered to crippled, visually handicapped, and auditorially handicapped pupils of adolescent age (thirteen years old or older) in a selected group of day-school systems, in which supervisory service for the education of the handicapped was a recognized feature. The supervisors concerned were unanimous in their conviction that high-school education for the physically handicapped should furnish a rich background of social and cultural experiences, with an exploration of occupational aptitudes and interests, but without stress on vocational training as such. One supervisor expressed it in this way:

Give them a liberal education—ability to meet various situations cheerfully—ability to make friends and to keep them—a wise use of leisure time and a willingness to help others at all times—a wholesome personality with no feeling of inferiority or sensitiveness, and not expecting favoritism.

With this liberal education, another says, should go "vocational information, testing for aptitudes, and vocational counseling," in order that the children "may know what jobs will be open to them." "Specific training can

best be postponed until the high school course is completed," says another.

Such comments as these should, of course, not be interpreted as leaving no room in high school for exploratory occupational courses, or even for specific vocational preparation on the part of some physically handicapped adolescents. Many of them must for financial reasons find their places in the occupational world at an early age. Others are more fitted for manual service than for continued study in school or college. No uniform rule can be applied to the treatment of all cases, since intellectual capacity, interests, and aptitudes differ among the physically handicapped as widely as among normal students. It is the part of the counseling program to use all possible methods of analysis to determine what the individual needs are and to guide accordingly.

Special groups vs. regular classes for vocational work.

Asked whether physically handicapped adolescents in day schools who are ready for vocational training should work in groups of their own kind or in vocational classes with physically normal pupils, an overwhelming majority of those responding in the study made by the Office of Education stressed the values of contact and work with normal students. While recognizing the need for the organization of special classes, particularly in the elementary school, in which specialized techniques are used, they recognized, too, the importance of giving to work and play with normal students a progressively prominent place. One supervisor said:

These people should be prepared for life in a normal world. When trained they will have to do the same work under the same working conditions as their physically normal brothers. This necessary adjustment may be made more readily by an approximation of normal working conditions during the period of vocational training.

self the wells of emotional and spiritual satisfaction that enrich the soul. In this respect, also, the physically handicapped pupil is in special need of guidance. He must learn to accept his handicap without bitterness, but—more than that—to find inner springs of happiness in spite of barriers which the handicap has placed upon his enjoyment of pleasures common to all of us.

To the blind the field of visual imagery is closed except as it is artificially built up or enjoyed through the eyes of another. They cannot stand in wonder and delight, beholding a glorious sunset or a beautiful woodland scene. To the deaf the concert hall holds no possibilities for soul satisfaction. The crippled boy in a wheel-chair cannot find companionship in nature through a mountain climb or a tramp in the woods. Each of these must be helped to enjoy vicariously the experiences from which he is physically barred, to enjoy in actuality many from which common opinion has all too often *considered* him barred, and to expand in every possible way the sources of recreational, cultural, emotional, and spiritual satisfaction within his reach.

To what extent guidance of this type succeeds is amply demonstrated in the lives of handicapped young people in our schools and colleges today. A blind high-school student takes a high jump in an athletic exhibit and gets an emotional thrill from his achievement. A crippled girl experiences the joys of travel with her unseen companions in books. A boy who has neither sight nor hearing, graduating from a full high-school course, went to South Africa last year and is now at home organizing the notes which he took on his trip. Into the silent night of this boy's life there has penetrated, too, a deep appreciation of spiritual experience which he portrays vividly in his statement of "What God Means to Me":²

God is a great deal of help to me. He helps me to breathe, to be very happy, healthy, strong, kind, well, courteous, and good. He keeps me from being very bad, cross, unkind, and unhappy. He is the helper and keeper in my body. He also keeps me lively and active all the time. He sings to me in my heart more beautifully than I sing.

He sometimes sings to me in my heart when I am quiet and asleep. My spirit will never die because it is God's spirit. God was in existence long before the beginning of time, before the earth, sun, and heavens were formed. Nobody knows where He lived before the beginning of time, but I think it was light and happy wherever He was. Now He is living in the hearts of children.

Blind and deaf, yet keenly sensitive to spiritual truths, this boy uses an imagery and an expressiveness that are worthy of seeing eyes and hearing ears. Sympathetic and skilful guidance has scaled the walls of dark silence and brought into his life what could never have been there without it.

LEARNING TO EARN

And now we come to what is considered by many to be the most immediate and the most practical function of guidance, which can nevertheless be realized only if the foundation stones upon which it rests have been firmly laid. *Learning to live with other people*, at least without friction, and *learning to live with one's self* with a fair degree of contentment are both indispensable to mental health. And a fair degree of mental health is indispensable to sound and continuing occupational adjustment. The thoughtful employer assures us that the contented worker who gets along amicably with his fellow workers is, other things being equal, more likely to achieve success on the job than the man who is looking for favors, resents criticism, insists upon having his own way, is suspicious of his comrades, "carries a chip

²Used by courtesy of Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind, Watertown, Massachusetts.

istics of the individual, with his individual abilities and disabilities. Satisfactory guidance and preparation of a handicapped pupil are dependent upon the care and the skill with which his case has been diagnosed from the standpoint of vocational possibilities and limitations *for him*, and upon the intelligence with which he as an individual has been led to a wise choice of occupational activity.

Moreover, too much reliability should not be placed upon present occupational placements as an index of desirable goals for handicapped students in the schools today. It may well be that the possibilities have scarcely been tapped, and that, as we give more attention in our guidance programs to social adjustment and poise *from the kindergarten or nursery school through the high school*, we shall find that vocational adjustment will be a less difficult matter.

THE CHALLENGE

The points discussed in this paper are only a few of those which demand a special emphasis in the guidance of physically handi-

capped pupils. There has been no attempt to enter into the consideration of placement and follow-up of the adult, although I am quite conscious of the fact that the problems in those fields are legion. The purpose has been rather to point out that the guidance program—even a *vocational* guidance program—cannot possibly avoid the social and emotional phases of a physically handicapped child's life if it is to help him to make a satisfactory adjustment. Physically handicapped young people are a very real part of the American school population. They are asking only that they be given an opportunity to live happily, to grow constructively, and to show what they can do despite a handicap. Their contribution to the work of the world has already been a significant one. It can become much more significant if, in our guidance programs, *we* accept, and lead our *handicapped pupils* to accept, the challenge inherent in the statement of my blind friend when he said: "A handicap is an extra burden placed upon a superior contender in order to equalize the contest."

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